

ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ESP CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: *Although soft skills have recently become a desirable part of university training, our experience with practicing oral communication skills in ESP classes (legal English) has shown that a considerable number of students do not perceive developing such skills important. The workshop presents a way of improving the students' oral competence; its content is based on materials used in the regular classes of English for Lawyers and the intensive course of Communication Skills in Legal English taught as part of the series Soft Skills in Foreign Languages (within the COMPACT project) at Masaryk University in Brno. The participants are not required to have any specialized knowledge of legal English; however they are going to practice their skills by role playing lawyer-client interviews. The workshop includes three phases of developing the skills: preparation, practice and self-reflection. This structure can be easily adopted for various other professional settings.*

1. Introduction

Masaryk University Language Centre carried out a project entitled COMPACT [3], the aim of which was, among other goals, to follow the modern trend of introducing soft-skill practice into university curriculum. All in all, 26 courses of soft-skills in foreign languages were designed and taught by the Centre's teachers. The present paper is going to concentrate on the outcomes of one of them, a course with the title "Communication Skills in Legal English" [1]. At the end of the course, we asked the participants to give us feedback which showed that they appreciated the course very much. They said in the questionnaires they consider good communication skills essential for their professional life and believe that soft-skills courses have their place in the undergraduate education. The current compulsory courses of foreign languages for academic and professional purposes taught at Masaryk University cover, apart from the specialist content, also presentation skills and a job interview practice. Based on the positive feedback from the COMPACT courses participants, we made effort to include more soft skills practice into the regular classes of legal English.

In this context, it may be beneficial to include a definition of soft skills: "Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects. Unlike hard skills, which are about a person's skill set and ability to perform a certain type of task or activity, soft skills are interpersonal and broadly applicable." [8]

In this paper we are going to share our experience with implementing a purposeful practice of **client interviews** and to provide a few tips for interesting and effective development of students' oral competencies. We are going to concentrate on three stages of the training: preparation + motivation, practice, and self-reflexion. Even though the examples presented in the paper will be taken from legal English, the structure and the tips can be equally effectively applied to other professional settings.

2. The reality in the classroom

At the Faculty of Law, Masaryk University, the course "English for Lawyers" is taught in the first four semesters of the Master's study programme. Young students, who have only just began their studies, usually focus on obtaining the hard skills related to their chosen profession and do not appreciate the value of soft skills. It can be quite challenging for a teacher to explain the importance of good communication techniques (for effective communication see e.g. [7]).

The students often confuse having good communication skills with being communicative. We can illustrate this with an example: after having practised job interviews (pair work, each "interviewer" questioned three "applicants", one by one) the teacher asked the student how they felt about the activity and received an immediate answer from an enthusiastic "interviewer": "Well, I found the task very easy, I'm a communicative person, so I had a very good chat with everyone." Needless to say, there were also some "interviewers" (often the best students in the group) who realized there is more to an interview than a "good chat". They admitted that they found the task difficult because they had

not prepared for the interviewing well enough, for example they did not know what kind of applicant they were really looking for. It is therefore important that the students realize what the purpose of a communication task is.

3. Preparation and motivation

3.1 Language functions and interview stages

Before role-playing interviews the students should be equipped with suitable phrases and should be aware of their appropriate uses. Practising language functions can be done separately, e.g. in previous lessons, or as part of the interview task itself, but in both cases the functions can be successfully linked to the structure of the interview and objectives of each stage. The phases of lawyer–client interviews may have various forms (see e.g. [4], [5], [6]); we can present the following version:

- Opening (aim: to establish a good working relationship) – welcoming, small talk, explaining preliminary matters, getting an overview of the case
- Listening and questioning (aim: to establish facts of the case) – active listening, appropriate questioning, checking for understanding, summarizing
- Advising (aim: to identify and develop a legal theory involved) – asking for details, explaining, applying the theory, advising, suggesting options
- Concluding (aim: to confirm what has been agreed on) – confirming, describing the future steps, parting

3.2 Setting the aim

When practising interviews, the students need to concentrate on at least three aspects: the content, the language, and the skills, which can cause difficulties, or even frustration. It is, therefore, advisable to dose the art of successful interviewing in pieces. This cannot be accomplished within a single practice; a series of communication tasks with various goals is needed.

The students should know what the aim of the task is, but the teacher must be careful about balancing the aim with the content and the abilities of the students. The goal of communication practice can vary, e.g.:

- developing the oral skills in general (suitable when we have simple, straightforward cases)
- practising active listening, summarizing, explaining, advising, ... (needs careful preparation of details)
- focusing on specific details, e.g. body language, establishing rapport with the client
- revising the topic of the lesson through a communication task
- solving a problem, e.g. dealing with a specific client, finding the solution of the client's problem

3.3 Motivation

The motivation can include brainstorming ideas, facts, techniques, examples, experience etc. related to the aim of the task. It is, however, effective to use some additional materials that illustrate the matter at hand.

3.4 Using video for motivating students

As stated above, our students have a limited experience of law because they are at the very beginning of their studies. In the first two years they learn about the history, sociology, psychology of law and are yet to encounter “real” legal seminars. Most of them, however, enjoy watching American ‘legal’ series from which they learn what to expect in the practice of law. We have found that using very short extracts from such series to introduce useful content is a very powerful motivation tool.

An example of a motivating film sequence is a lawyer – client interview taken from the series *Franklin and Bash (Jennifer of Troy Season 1 Episode 3)*. It introduces a case in which a client wants to sue her former employer for firing her for “being too beautiful”. The client is, in fact, a rather plain and overweight young woman. This comes as a shock to the lawyers who are to represent her. There is a

soft-skill aspect in the interview where the lawyers need to act professionally and not let the client know how they feel about her.

The students first watch a law firm meeting when they learn about the case, then they follow the first unplanned meeting of the lawyers and the unattractive client in the law firm corridor (which inevitably leads to bursts of laughter). Then they are put into the shoes of the lawyers and are asked to prepare for the difficult first official meeting. When they watch the scene first without and then with the voice, they have a chance to think about the soft-skills needed to deal with the situation. This puts them into the right mind-frame – they realize that a simple interview can be more difficult than they thought – and that it is not only about the language as such.

4. Practicing interviews

4.1 Preparing materials for the pair-work

Everybody will agree that it is not easy to prepare real-life tasks for LSP classes. On the one hand, it is impossible to write complex exercises without the help of professionals in the field, on the other, the authentic materials have to be adopted for the needs of the lessons. Naturally, preparing the roles for the interviews goes hand in hand with the aim of the task. The teacher's written scenarios can be sufficient for the students beginning with communication skills practice; however, a more thoughtful work on developing the skills of future lawyers needs a plausible case with a clear content and sufficient legal support. We used two main sources to obtain facts for our cases: suitable exercises (originally, it can be also listening, reading, or writing) from the textbooks of legal English ([4], [6]) and the description of real cases (e.g. [2]). The facts from a case are then transformed into the roles of clients and lawyers. The "client" obtains the description of who they are supposed to be, what problem they have, and what solution they expect. The "lawyer" receives the instructions regarding the interview itself (to welcome the client, to ask about the issue, to summarize ...), some hints concerning the questions that should be raised in connection to the case, and details on the law as it applies to the case.

4.2 Lawyer-client interviews

The students are given their roles and enough time to read them carefully. It is necessary to instruct the "clients" that they should not say all the details at once, they should let the "lawyer" practise his/her role – ask questions, summarize, etc. The "clients" can act as if they were nervous or upset, and make the "lawyer's" task more difficult by asking for more detailed explanations. The "clients" make up details of their problems themselves. The "lawyer" should lead the interview through all the stages, paying attention to using appropriate language, restating the facts, suggesting future steps, etc.

With an odd number of students, one group of three can consist of either two lawyers and a client, or of one lawyer and two clients, depending on the case or the aim of the task.

Naturally, it is not possible to monitor each pair during the whole interview. We have learnt from our experience that the students follow several patterns of dealing with the same task and make similar mistakes. After role playing the task with more groups, the teacher obtains sufficient material for feedback on what the students have problems with and what needs to be changed to make the task more effective.

5. Self-reflexion

Even though self-reflexion should become an important part of developing any skills, the students usually struggle with accepting its significance. It is sufficient if the students (as "lawyers" in the interviews) ask themselves several questions, depending on the aim of the task, e.g.

- Did I establish and maintain rapport with the client?
- Did I use appropriate questions and language?
- Did I confirm understanding throughout the interview?
- Did I explain the matters clearly to the client?
- Did I leave enough space for the client and, at the same time, didn't let him/her go away from the topic?

- Did I pay attention to my body language?

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to stress that the COMPACT project gave us an opportunity to expand our expertise and subsequently introduce soft-skills into the legal English and other LSP syllabi. We have learnt that LSP students perceive including real-life scenarios as very beneficial and motivating aspects of their lesson and they appreciate the expansion of the scope of the lesson content. Last but not least, it also equips them with extra competencies for their future carriers.

References:

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